

Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women

Brockton Public Hearing REPORT

*On November 14, 2001,
the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women
held its 8th public hearing
in Brockton, Massachusetts,
at the Brockton Visiting Nurse Association
500 Belmont Street.*

*The purpose of this hearing was to
listen to the concerns of
women, girls, and organizations in Central Massachusetts.*

*The Commission hopes that the
comments, feedback, and input of the participants
will help us focus on some of the most pressing concerns
facing women and girls in our state.*

Attendees

Commissioners

Donna Finneran
Marianne Fleckner, Chair
Elaine Guiney, Vice-Chair

Elected Officials

Geraldine Creedon, State Representative, Plymouth and Bristol Counties
Carole Mooney, Selectman, Town of Rockland
Kathleen M. Teahan, State Representative, Plymouth County
John T. Yunits, Jr., Mayor of Brockton

Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women Staff

Priscilla Golding, Executive Director
Sonia Shah, Administrative Assistant
Valerie Taing, Student Intern

Brockton Mayor's Commission on Women's Issues

Paula Daddona, Chair
Peg Dozier
Pat Foley
Shirley Howard, Vice Chair
Mary Nolan, Secretary
Eleanor Wentworth

Participants from the Community

Anne Beauregard, Mass Women's Political Caucus
Sandra Bromberg, Old Colony Y Girls Program
Monalou Callery, Brockton Family and Community Resources
Cheryl Copeland, MA Federation of Business and Professional Women
Layla D'Emilia-Shepherd, Plymouth County DA's Office
Barbara Dixon, Home Advantage Private Health Care, Inc.
Marina Donahue, Diabetes Health, Brockton Visiting Nurse Association
Edna Donoghue, American Cancer Society
Dave Farrell, Brockton Mayor's Office
Philomena Hare, Mass Action
Carol Howes, Health Care of Southeastern MA
Linda Johnson, Brockton Family and Community Resources (BF&CR)
Sandy Karahalidis, B/C
Heather Kennedy, Brockton Area Multi-Services, Inc. (BAMSI) Teen Helpline

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Participants from the Community, Continued

Gina Louis, Brockton Area Multi-Services, Inc. (BAMSI) Teen Helpline
Shabram Louise, Brockton Area Multi-Services, Inc. (BAMSI) Teen Helpline
Robert Martin, Human Services Administrator for the City of Brockton
Jill McAnern, My Turn, Inc.
Ginny Murray, Brockton Area Multi-Services, Inc. (BAMSI)
Maria Robbins, Womansplace Crisis Center
Kathy Ward, Brockton Family Planning

Opening Remarks

Welcome and Introduction by Marianne Fleckner, Chair

Chair Fleckner welcomed members of the community to the Commission's public hearing. She thanked the Brockton Mayor's Women's Commission for their help in publicizing the hearing and thanked the Brockton Visiting Nurse Association for offering their space for the hearing. She introduced the Commissioners present: Donna Finneran and Vice-Chair Elaine Guiney.

Chair Fleckner also introduced the Brockton Mayor's Women's Commission. After giving a brief overview of the history of the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women, Chair Fleckner discussed the ground rules for testimony. She explained that the testimonies would be heard in the order people signed in at the registration desk. There are also other ways to let your voice be heard, Chair Fleckner explained, such as submitting written testimony in the box at the registration desk or adding comments on post-it notes to the Issue Boards throughout the room.

Summary of Testimony

The following summaries are based on note-takers at the meeting, staff transcribing the audiocassette recording of the testimony, and written testimony provided by those who did not speak.

Maria Robbins

Educator, Community Outreach at Womansplace Crisis Center

Ms. Robbins began her testimony by outlining the services that Womansplace offers. She acknowledged that violence against women and children is a horrific problem nationwide. She noted that in the year 2000, Jane Doe, Inc. provided Massachusetts community based services for 33,511 women and children suffering from domestic violence. Ms. Robbins is concerned that at this time, every shelter in the state of MA is full and that there are more shelters in MA for animals than for battered women and children.

Ms. Robbins stressed the importance of focusing on prevention education programs targeted towards young boys and girls that they need to be educated that violence is not normal and they need to be exposed to positive male role models. Ms. Robbins ended by saying it's great to have services for people who have been traumatized, but it won't end the problem of violence.

Marina Donahue

Diabetes Nurse Educator, Brockton Visiting Nurse Association

Ms. Donahue has worked in Brockton since 1993 as a diabetes educator. She noted that approximately 16 to 18 million people in the U.S. have been diagnosed with diabetes and there are many more who have not been diagnosed. Type II diabetes is more prevalent in women and in ethnic groups, and the number of children from ages 10 to 18 who are being diagnosed with diabetes II is surging. Diabetes costs the United States 105 billion dollars annually.

Ms. Donahue is concerned about all of these Diabetes related issues and she noted that living a healthy lifestyle could prevent Diabetes. She recommended a lot of prevention education targeted towards high-risk groups to promote awareness.

Gina Louis and Shabram Louise

Peer Leaders Brockton Area Multi-Services, Inc. (BAMSI) Teen Helpline

Ms. Louis and Ms. Louise spoke about secondhand smoke otherwise known as Environmental Tobacco smoke (ETS) which causes lung cancer and other significant health threats to children and adults. Their goal is to have smoke-free regulations in Brockton. They asked everyone to support the smoke-free coalition by urging local government officials to take action by passing a smoking control ordinance, or ETS regulations, in Brockton.

Linda Johnson

Victim Advocate, Brockton Family and Community Resources (BF&CR)

Written testimony on file.

Ms. Johnson is a victim advocate at Brockton Family and Community Resources and she spoke on behalf of domestic violence victims, to give a voice to those who have not had the opportunity to freely express themselves. Ms. Johnson spoke about the many roadblocks that keep women and children from leaving abusive relationships. One particular concern she noted is the fact that victims of domestic violence continue to be defined as women who are physically injured by their abusers. In reality, victims of domestic violence endure many non-physical types of abuse such as, intimidation, manipulation, verbal abuse, economic abuse, and isolation. These abuses leave women paralyzed by fear and a consuming feeling of powerlessness.

Many victims in isolation use substances to self medicate. Consequently, women are further victimized by the very systems that should be in place to help them. Their children are taken away from them and custody is given to the batterer who fools the system with his battering personality, also known as the dual presentation. Batterers successfully fool the system into believing he is something that he is not.

Ms. Johnson also stated that children need to relearn the components of a respectful relationship if the domestic violence cycle is to be stopped.

On December 31, 2001, the Commission on the Status of Women received additional written testimony from Ms. Johnson and Ms. Uzzell. This additional testimony addresses the issue “Homeless Should Not Mean Hopeless.” This testimony is on file in the Commission office.

John T. Yunits, Jr.

Mayor of the City of Brockton

Mayor Yunits thanked the Massachusetts Women’s Commission for hosting the public hearing in Brockton. He asked to address two gigantic issues. First is the lack of affordable housing for mothers who are caught up in the housing crisis that they did not create. A stable rent environment has been pushed out of whack by a wild economy so many head-of-household working mothers who earn \$25k-\$35k are being displaced by the rental market.

The second issue is the lack of money and the lack of resources. Mayor Yunits hopes the city can continue to provide the level of services that have been provided during the last couple of years. He noted that daycare will always be an issue and although Brockton has started to make progress in that area, we could lose a lot of ground if we don’t collaborate and find ways to work together.

He stated that it’s going to be difficult for us all to sustain ourselves over the next 18 months or so and he urged everyone to work with their local officials to rethink and reshape government as we know it.

Monalou Callery

Advocate, Brockton Family and Community Resources

Written testimony on file.

Ms. Callery, a domestic violence survivor and advocate, has worked with victims of domestic violence for twenty years. She urges the Women’s Commission to take a serious look at the issues that plague victims of domestic violence. These issues include, economic development, discrimination in the workplace, health care that depending on where you live in the state, may or may not be adequate, substandard housing, financial assistance with welfare reform that sets women up to fail, childcare with strings attached, and the lack of transportation. She also noted that victim service agencies are pitted against each other to vie for funding.

Ms. Callery feels that all of these issues are equally important as each issue impacts another. She suggests that we start with a “state plan” that will address the problems with solutions in an action plan.

Carole Mooney

Selectman, Town of Rockland

Ms. Mooney feels that we must encourage more women to participate in local governments in order to gain the power to make other improvements. With women in the drivers seat in all levels such as women on the school committee and women as selectmen, we can improve many situations for not only women, but for children and the elderly as well.

Cheryl Copeland

Recording Secretary, MA Federation of Business and Professional Women

Written testimony on file.

Ms. Copeland noted that the Massachusetts Federation of Business and Professional Women is in its 80th year of advocating for working women. She expressed her concern for women and their economic development because more and more women are entering the workforce, but they earn less than men. Because women earn less, they must work longer and they receive lower Social Security benefits when they retire.

Ms. Copeland encouraged the Commission to endorse legislation that would ensure adequate monies for unemployment insurance during the recession, and in better economic times, work to ensure equal pay for equal work.

Pat Foley

Brockton Mayor's Commission on Women's Issues

Ms. Foley worked at a battered women and rape crisis center in Brockton for many years. She is concerned about the level of funding that Human Services receive and feels that budget cuts always fall disproportionately on those who can least afford it. She suggests that the state institute housing vouchers so that victims have a place to go when they leave their batterers. She also suggests that more attention and money needs to be paid to Human Services than to projects such as the Big Dig.

Geraldine Creedon

State Representative, Plymouth and Bristol Counties

Representative Creedon first spoke about legislation for a Brockton Women's Commission and how, at that time, the Mayor vetoed it because there would be too many appointed members (22). She then commended the Brockton Women's Commission on how far they have come.

Representative Creedon serves on the Ways and Means Committee and the Joint Committee On Human Services and Elderly Affairs. She noted that there will have to be budget cuts, probably many in Human Services, so volunteerism will have to be alive again to help our neighbors and schools.

Kathleen M. Teahan

State Representative, Plymouth County

Representative Teahan spoke about issues that center around health care. Senior citizens are concerned that their Medicare costs are going to double in January, from forty dollars a month to eighty. They are also concerned that their Medigap insurance cost premiums are going up and that the Advantage Pharmacy program may be dropped.

Representative Teahan also spoke about oral health care and the need for dental insurance for all people no matter what their occupations are, or what their economic status is. Serious teeth problems can impact a person's entire health because infections in the mouth complicate diabetes, heart disease, and so many other things such as self-esteem and employment. These issues could lead to an economic issue.

Affordable housing is another concern of Representative Teahan. Most calls she receives from constituents are regarding affordable housing, especially for single parents who are the head of their household and family members who become disabled and cannot work. Rental costs are skyrocketing and consequently, entire families are being displaced. Having enough affordable housing is a huge issue that must be resolved.

Education also continues to be a number one priority because it is the hope of our future and the hope for our economic return and recovery. The state needs college graduates who are going to be able to step into various positions such as in the research and development and finance industries. Education keeps people out of prison and it keeps people off of welfare. Representative Teahan ended her testimony by thanking the Commission for all the work they are doing and she offered to help them to keep making things happen.

Robert Martin

Human Services Administrator for the City of Brockton

Mr. Martin has been working for the City of Brockton for almost 30 years. He expressed his first concern regarding the number of emergency shelter crisis calls he is receiving which are mostly from women who are the head of their household. Mr. Martin stated that safety net issues are very important and he suggests that the Commonwealth institute a nights and weekends toll free 800 phone number so people can call it to find out where there are available shelter beds within the state.

Mr. Martin's second concern was daycare and job care vouchers, which he feels are absolutely critical. He stated there is a need to look at vouchers in a more creative way such as exploring matching funds. In Brockton, there is a wait for

many young women with children who want to go back to work but can't until they receive vouchers.

The third area of concern is affordable housing, which by definition is questionable. Mr. Martin asked, "What is affordable housing?" Mr. Martin stated that Brockton and the Commonwealth are in an affordable housing crisis, which needs to be addressed and resolved. He suggested that incentives and disincentives should be provided to communities that aren't at the 10.0 affordable housing level. There are many folks who are working slightly above the poverty level margin who are finding it extremely difficult to find affordable housing.

Mr. Martin ended his testimony by reiterating the importance of resolving the safety net issue and he commended the Brockton health care system. Brockton is doing a better job today with healthcare thanks to Commonwealth funds and thanks to Federal funds.

Diane Driscoll (did not testify at hearing)

Written testimony on file.

Ms. Driscoll expressed her concern that the Mary Kennedy Senior Center in Brockton has no handicap accessible doors. She is also concerned that the center only accommodates 200 seniors while there are 16,000 seniors living in Brockton. Ms. Driscoll is advocating for handicapped doors to be established as mandatory in all Senior Councils on Aging centers in the state of Massachusetts.

Closing Remarks

Chair Fleckner thanked everyone for attending and adjourned the hearing.

Issue Boards

Participants were invited to write anonymous comments on post-it notes and stick them to the appropriate Issue Board during the hearing.

The topics covered by the Issue Boards were: Childcare, Economic Development/Stability, Girls' Issues, Health Care, Violence Against Women, and Other.

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Girls' Issues

— Older girls 17, 18, 19, who are homeless, no family resources, no completed education, mental health issues with no resources or case management, are not being serviced. It's as if people in the system are waiting for them to slip into prostitution, depression, suicide, or adult correction before any systems will help, if ever!